

COMMUNITY DIALOG ON GANG ACTIVITY AND REVITALIZATION IN THE HERITAGE/ANNANDALE AREA

Meeting 3 Summary April 14, 2004

The third meeting of the Community Dialog on Gang Activity and Revitalization in the Heritage/Annandale Area began at 5 p.m. on April 14, 2004, at Braddock Elementary School. Supervisor Bulova welcomed everyone and explained that this meeting would focus on how local and federal courts are tackling the problem of gang activity.

Paul McNulty, the United States Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, spoke first. He reiterated the notion from earlier meetings that law enforcement is not the only solution to criminal gang activity. The problem in Northern Virginia, however, is serious and growing. Recruitment begins at elementary and middle schools, and on any given day, roughly 3,000 gang members reside in Northern Virginia.

Congressman Frank Wolf's Tenth District Task Force, Mr. McNulty explained, provides invaluable assistance to law enforcement throughout Northern Virginia for the criminal gang problem. Using funding from the Task Force, local jurisdictions work together, share intelligence and make coordinated arrests. Mr. McNulty described their work as an "enforcement effort with a prevention effect."

Mr. McNulty's office only prosecutes the most serious cases or those crimes taking place on federal property. He cited the examples of the murder at Daingerfield Island off of the George Washington Memorial Parkway and the murder of Brenda Paz in the Shenandoah National Park. Most cases involving criminal gang activity are prosecuted at the local level.

Supervisor Bulova then turned the floor over to Bob Bermingham of the Probation Services Division of Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court. The court's program treats and rehabilitates children and their families. The probation officers are charged with both enforcing the orders of the court and providing social work and assistance.

Probation Services has responded to the rise in criminal gang activity by increasing communication with the Gang and Fugitive Units of the Fairfax County Police Department. Probation officers undergo specialized training in collaboration with the police department. Recently, representatives from Probation Services, the police, Fairfax County Public Schools, and Department of Systems Management for Human Services created a task force to address the escalating criminal gang problem. Probation Services has also designated two officers to deal specifically with gang-related issues.

Supervision of convicted youths can take the form of supervised releases, electronic monitoring or probation. Counseling includes family assistance, substance abuse, anger management and a victim's impact project. The Court administers residential programs like the Less Secure Shelter, Juvenile Detention Center, and Girls/Boys Probation House.

Several hurdles remain to be crossed, according to Mr. Bermingham. Probation Services faces problems with language and cultural barriers on a regular basis. They are also bound by strict confidentiality rules that prevent sharing of information with other agencies. Mr. Bermingham is hopeful that the situation can improve, however, with continued community involvement and multi-agency coordination.

Supervisor Bulova then allotted time for questions from the audience. One person asked about cultural diversity on the Tenth District Task Force and the Fairfax County Police Gang Unit. Paul McNulty said that diversity is a common stumbling block for law enforcement agencies, especially when language barriers come into play. He said that it is difficult to find an appropriate level of diversity within a law enforcement unit.

Another gentleman asked about how the police made estimates for the number of “gang-involved persons” in Fairfax County. Lt. Col. Chuck Peters of the Fairfax County Police Department explained that the police use three groupings to identify gang-involved persons: known gang members, gang associates (i.e., not confessed members), and gang “wannabes.”

Supervisor Bulova broke the audience up into small groups to discuss the community’s role in working with law enforcement. Ideas included breaking down language barriers by offering English as a Second Language classes, more after-school programs for young people, more Neighborhood Watch programs, and increased dialog between law enforcement officers and community members.

The meeting adjourned at 7:00 p.m.